

REVIEW OF WASTE POLICIES

July 2010

The Secretary of State for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs the Rt Hon Caroline Spelman MP has announced that the Government will be undertaking a full review of waste policy in England. On the July 29th a call for evidence was published. The deadline for evidence to be received is relatively short (October 7th).

With that in mind, and also the potential limitations on time at the September AGM of the Joint Waste Disposal Board, I have put together a briefing to set the ball rolling.

It has been assumed, as with other consultations, that we will seek to make a partnership response. Alongside the chance to have our views taken into account, it is also an opportunity for us to raise the profile of the re3 councils and the Joint Board. I'm happy to try to collate contributions to a response in time for a discussion at the JWDB Meeting at the end of September. If you think that's a good idea, it would be most helpful if responses could be sent to the re3 Project Team by the middle of September (Monday 13th). Alternatively, you could make contributions via your appropriate officers. That will allow a report to be written in time for the Board.

The Call for Evidence can be viewed at the following website address:

www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/consult/waste-review/

On the above page there is an online survey, an invitation to join an online Waste Review debate between July 29th and 9th September and the Call for Evidence document and Background information which I have circulated with this draft response.

The Review is intended to be complete by April 2011.

The Call for Evidence poses a set of questions and this document constitutes a limited briefing to most of them. If there are other issues, not covered by the questions, which you would like to include then feel free to do so - the Call for Evidence asks us to do just that.

General

2.3 This group of questions considers some aspects of our general approach to waste policy and waste delivery. We would welcome your views on the Government's approach to waste, including these specific questions:

- What should the nation's ambition for waste management be? What do we need to do to achieve a 'zero waste economy'?

Zero waste is not a particularly clear term to be using. Particularly for the public who may be sceptical or unsure of what it means, or even turned-off by the scale of what it suggests.

Nevertheless, as described in the background information, its aims are laudable and it can certainly provide a focus for policy and strategy.

As regards what we need to achieve, perhaps the key achievement would be markets and demand for the materials which we will be seeking to divert away from ultimate disposal. That's a bit 'chicken and egg' because the market won't develop without the raw materials at start-up but equally (as we know with 'other' plastics) without the market it's tricky to start the collection. This is probably a key area for Government.

- How could the contribution waste management in England makes to the economy and our environmental and energy goals be maximised?

The promotion of EfW and particularly AD is a step in the right direction here.

- How can Government make the best use of the skills and knowledge of the private sector, civil society and local communities in delivering a zero waste economy?

It's likely that the skills and knowledge of the private sector are already utilised to the fullest extent. It's hard to think of an area of waste management which is currently barred to the private sector. Our own contract is a case in point - a partnership where the private sector applies its expertise to service delivery.

As regards civil society and local communities, there is certainly scope for more involvement and that is something investigated later in this document.

- Do local authorities have the right responsibilities for waste services? Are there further services that could be devolved to local authorities or directly to local communities?

Within re3, our role as combined Waste Collection Authorities (WCA) and Waste Disposal Authorities (WDA) has enabled the councils to plan ahead and make massive improvements in waste management over the last decade. Other, similar partnerships have also followed the same route.

Projects such as our own do demonstrate the strategic potential for combining the direct delivery of an essential service to residents, at the edge of curtilage, with the longer term requirements of waste management, processing and disposal.

How could responsibilities be apportioned differently?

Councils could be asked or required to do more, for example as advocates and enablers of trade waste recycling. It may not require the councils to actually do the collections themselves, there is a mature market for trade waste collections and there would be risks for new entrants. Councils could do more, however, to promote (in a practical sense) better practices for traders. Any new, public sector funded, facilities could be required to provide a certain percentage of capacity for local trade recycling. This is something that the re3 councils and WRG have already begun. The councils won an award for their business waste strategy and we have pushed WRG to supporting local businesses, utilising current spare capacity within our facilities, and to their credit they are.

There certainly is a case for greater involvement of the community in waste management. Whether residents, if they were directly consulted, would take some of the tougher decisions that may from time to time need to be made is uncertain however. But their involvement may not need to be in direct decision making. It could be a greater involvement in the collection and performance of the services delivered to them. It's a horrible word to use but there may need to be some parameters to the involvement so that it served a common purpose - whether that purpose was decided by the community, the council or central Gov't.

- **How can illegal waste activity be minimised, including reducing levels of fly-tipping? Are sanctions for breaches of waste regulation fair and proportionate?**
- **How can we balance regulation to ensure that we protect health and the environment without unnecessarily burdening businesses and local authorities? What are the opportunities to reduce or remove the burdens of regulations?**

Waste Prevention

2.4 Waste prevention is the term used for taking measures to reduce the quantity of waste that is generated. These measures range from simple actions such as reducing food waste and reusing items to technical activities such as extending the lifespan of products. It also includes measures taken before a material becomes waste to reduce its hazardousness or other negative impacts of waste. As the first layer of the hierarchy, it should be promoted as a priority over the others. We would welcome your views on waste prevention in England, and in particular on:

- What roles should (i) national and local government; (ii) businesses; (iii) voluntary organisations; and (iv) individuals take in order to prevent waste from arising, and to reduce the hazardousness or environmental impact of waste?

There is already a lot going on in this area. The Courtauld Commitment is a perfect example of how the businesses can set their own targets for improvement. They may not bite to the same extent as a legislated target but there is clearly a balance to be struck.

There is a case for some continuity in these areas and rather than introducing a raft of new initiatives, supporting those which have shown signs of delivering results. In that way, the principles they promote might stand a better chance of becoming the accepted norm.

- What can be done to encourage businesses to design and manufacture products which produce less waste – such as those which last longer, can be upgraded and/or repaired, and don't have hazardous components? How might Responsibility Deals contribute to this?

There are unlikely to be many successful businesses for whom wastefulness is a part of their production process. That's not to gloss over this question in any way but it simply is not sustainable. That probably makes this issue more about the life of the product than the efficiency of the production.

If we assume that significantly longer life-spans are achievable then this issue may *simply* require a change of perspective on the part of consumers and businesses. Firstly, consumers may need to be prepared to pay more for a product with a longer useful life. Secondly, businesses may need to be prepared for a longer period between purchase and replacement.

It remains to be seen whether businesses, some of whom already consider themselves active in a Corporate Social Responsibility sense, would respond to the idea of Responsibility Deals.

- Which waste streams or materials should be a priority for waste prevention?

There are perhaps two approaches here. Firstly to address waste by volume so that the most prevalent waste types are targeted and potentially the greatest reduction in waste is achieved. Secondly, to address waste by impact so that the most valuable resources or the most potentially damaging waste types are targeted and their wastage reduced.

A third way of prioritising, which involves elements of the above, might be to do so on cost grounds alone.

This is an area where, after the initial level of consideration, local authorities have limited scope. As local authorities, we are successful at the collection and commissioning end but we do not have a stake in the reprocessing, marketing and retailing end of the 'chain'. That is where this question leads because, to prevent waste, products need to be more robust and reliable or simple to de-manufacture.

- How should waste prevention be measured?

There is an argument to say that it shouldn't directly be measured.

Here's an example of how trying to measure something which you've prevented can be problematic. In the past, some local authorities wanted to see greater value from measures they'd taken to prevent waste - in a theoretical sense. There were debates about the way in which home composting might contribute to local authority recycling targets. That may be a false debate. Material which never comes into the council sphere of influence, such as material composted by a resident in their own garden, has already contributed to council performance. It's waste that the resident had, but they dealt with it themselves and it did not contribute to the amount requiring management by the council. To press, as some local authorities did, for the apportionment of material (composted by residents at home) to the council's recycling rate was to argue for double counting.

The value of prevention is inherent in the residual cost. If we prevent more, then the cost of that which has yet to be prevented should benefit. A business prevents wastage because it is counter-productive, it probably doesn't need any more incentive than that. The same principle could apply elsewhere too.

Preparing for Reuse

2.5 Preparing for reuse means checking, cleaning or repairing recovery operations, by which products or components of products that have become waste are prepared so that they can be re-used without any other pre-processing. Examples of preparing for reuse are refurbishing old IT equipment or discarded furniture. We would welcome your views on preparing for reuse in England and in particular:

- What more do you think Government, businesses and civil society could do to increase activities that prepare waste for reuse?

We need to be prepared to reuse more than we do at present. That's a tough nut to crack - if we're honest, who doesn't relish unwrapping something new from its packaging?

Could businesses be encouraged to develop more products which have reuse potential readily designed into them? Wouldn't that be counter-intuitive to a business for whom the turnover of new products is essential to profitability.

- Which waste streams or products are priorities for reuse?

Packaging would appear to be the obvious one although there may be some concerns from consumers.

Electrical and 'white' goods could also be a target. Many are discarded before the point at which they no longer work. While the WEEE Regulations ensure that larger amounts than ever before are recovered, a period of reuse prior to deconstruction, might be a better outcome for WEEE.

- What are the existing barriers to preparing more waste for reuse from both the household waste stream and the 'Commercial and Industrial' and 'Construction and Demolition' waste streams?
- Who is best placed to deliver an increase in reuse? How could civil society take a role?

There is no 'best placed' individual or organisation. This sort of activity can be helped by existing practitioners but it really needs to become the mainstream before it will have an impact in waste terms.

Recycling

2.6 Recycling means converting used materials into new products. For most materials and products, recycling is better for the environment than energy recovery and disposal. We would welcome your views on recycling in England generally, and in particular:

- What should the role and nature of local authority waste management collection and disposal services be?

The existing framework of local authorities as providers and/or commissioners of waste management services has seen massive improvements in overall waste management over the last decade. The regulatory framework has also improved greatly and has played its role in measuring and stimulating improvement.

See directly below...

- How can individuals, businesses and communities best be motivated to recycle more?

It was certainly the case in the past, that recycling was seen as something done for the council by the residents. That has never really been the way that the councils envisaged it, but it has been the perception by residents. Perhaps the role of local authority in waste management could more obviously be about enabling the community. The existing responsibilities for collection and disposal do work, and a case for change there is not clear. However, the involvement of local businesses, community groups and individuals is not always easy. If local authorities were tasked with enabling the community to play their part, within the framework set out by central Gov't and local plans, then perhaps the perception of a top-down requirement to recycle could be overcome.

It would seem counter-productive for a rash of services, simply duplicating those already provided by the councils, to spring up in an area. That said, if an increase in performance (more diversion from landfill, more re-use, more recycling, better communication) results, it could be a consideration that the local authority should support the initiative.

- How does the choice, including frequency, of collection service impact on the quantity and quality of waste fit for recycling?

This is an issue which could be quite tricky for us to answer. Bracknell Forest and Reading have adopted an alternate collection frequency and have been able to introduce additional services and seen increases in recycling as a result. Wokingham has not chosen to introduce such a collection and, via a different route, has also seen increases in recycling.

Perhaps this issue should be explored less as a choice between two different methods of service delivery but more in the context of what changing the prevailing method would mean.

For LA's with an alternate schedule, returning to weekly collections would almost certainly entail additional costs and may see subsequent drops in recycling rate.

There was an increase in the amount of recycling collected by Bracknell Forest and Reading after the introduction of their alternate schedules.

It is difficult to say whether the quality of the material collected is any different as a result of the schedule of collection. Each of the re3 councils is working hard to address the quality of the mixed dry recyclables they collect so there would appear to be no clear answer.

- Should greater emphasis be placed on using recyclable/recycled materials in manufacturing and production and, if so, how should this be achieved?

This subject is, again, one of those in which local authorities have a limited stake.

On the face of it, it would be nice to advocate the use of UK recyclables in UK products. It would go some way to reducing carbon emissions from transporting waste and would seem to be supportive of the national economy. It may, however, fall foul of competition laws and may put UK businesses at a disadvantage against global competitors who may not have the same requirements.

The materials market is a global one and the wider use of recycled and recyclable materials and components will, no doubt, happen at the point that they are more economic to use than those alternatives which utilise 'virgin' materials.

It may be the role of central Gov't to liaise with European and Global trade partners over the economics and environmental benefits from specifying the recycled content of products, and their subsequent recyclability.

Energy recovery

2.7 Energy recovery is about extracting, through various technologies, energy from the waste left once as much as possible has been prevented, reused and recycled. Energy derived from bio waste can contribute to renewable energy targets. Energy from Waste (EfW) covers a range of established technologies including combustion and anaerobic digestion, as well as emerging technologies such as advanced gasification and pyrolysis. The Government is committed to delivering a huge increase in EfW through anaerobic digestion. We would welcome your views on EfW in England, and in particular:

- What are the barriers to delivering an increase in EfW capacity, including a huge increase in generation from anaerobic digestion? How might these be addressed?

Cost is probably the biggest factor. Not necessarily in terms of a straight comparison between gate fees for AD and other treatment types but because of the potential changes to existing collection arrangements. The potential contribution of AD, for example, in waste management and energy production is not in doubt but the question asks for barriers and the cost of both processing and collection is clearly one.

Linked to cost is proximity. Because of their nature, quite a few AD plants are located outside of the centres of population. That may make it necessary to bulk the material and then haul it for processing over relatively long distances. That's not too much different from what happens with other wastes but they do not need the sorts of handling required for food waste.

Linked to proximity is planning. Obtaining planning permission for new waste management infrastructure can be a complex process. Also, going back to their earlier question on the involvement of residents in waste management, it may be questionable whether residents would approve of a proximate AD plant. This is not intended to be critical of either residents or the planning process but simply to acknowledge another potential barrier.

Perhaps lastly, a market for the product of the process is also a factor. If we are processing waste to create energy, either by burning a product of the processing (directly burning it in EfW or generating gas and then burning that, as with some AD), or creating a gas which can be fed into a grid, then we have existing markets for the energy. However, can we find uses and support markets for what's left over? We have seen from our contract with Lakeside that a market exists for some of the residual ash.

- What role should Government, industry and voluntary groups play in communicating the benefits of EfW to local communities?

Communities will need to see the benefits, or at least be assured of them. The example of South East London Combined Heat and Power facility (below) may place a question mark against past and current thinking in this area.

Decentralised power generation could represent a clear illustration of the benefits of EfW. The commercial viability of schemes may have to take into account the potential expectation of the community for a direct subsidy on their power bills.

- How can Government best support local government in the development of waste management plans that include EfW facilities?

The Government could actively support the commissioning of EfW facilities where the business case for them can be made. That may result in certain types of EfW being favoured over others. For example, the type of EfW will determine the degree to which energy can be produced and exported directly to a National Grid or the extent to which heat could be exported to local households, businesses, schools, hospitals etc. In order to transfer heat, it is necessary to be proximate to the ultimate recipient of the heat. That may make combustion less favourable (even though it can be a good source of heat) to the recipient community.

It may be that the energy requirements of a community are at least as significant, if not more so, than the waste management requirements when making a case for a facility type. Government could set criteria in that area to ensure that both requirements are satisfied. It might be relevant for EfW to contribute to energy production and for EfW to be an expectation in both waste management and energy terms...local government does not have the same level of obligation to produce an 'Energy Strategy' as they do for a Waste Strategy for example?

This shift in focus may be helpful in moving towards the goals of zero waste. Rather than being motivated by what we don't want to do with a waste type, it might be our first thought to consider how its properties can be put to a range of uses.

- What steps can be taken to encourage community ownership of EfW facilities?

It is unclear whether the use of 'ownership' in this question relates more to a feeling of acceptance and good will on the part of a community or whether it relates to actual ownership of the facility. Also, what size of community are we considering?

South East London Community Heat and Power (SELCHP) is a 420,000t p/a EfW facility built within an urban environment and opened in 1994. It takes waste from Lewisham, Greenwich, Westminster and Bromley Borough's and generates energy equivalent to the requirements of 48,000 households. In terms of energy production, it is unclear how the presence of SELCHP directly benefits the community within which it resides. Energy produced at SELCHP is exported to the London Electricity system. It appears that the facility uses or releases all the heat it produces (despite its name, the system for transferring heat locally has apparently never been installed) and there is no mention of any direct benefits to the immediate locality from the energy production.

Smaller scale facilities which may not involve combustion or those where the heat in particular could be transferred to local users, might be appreciated by the community they served. Additionally, as technology progresses and the financial frameworks for contributing energy to the Grid (including the capacity for local authorities to sell energy they produce) it is conceivable that facilities could make a contribution to, and be incorporated within, communities (at the sort of scale that would be meaningful to the community).

Given the required capital cost of EfW facilities, and the necessity for a return on investment for private sector funders, it seems less likely that *actual* ownership by a community could be achieved. That should not, however, overshadow the potential benefits that might accrue from EfW in its various guises.

Disposal

2.8 Disposal is now considered the last resort for many types of waste. Biodegradable waste in landfill decomposes to release methane, one of the most dangerous greenhouse gases. Disposing of valuable resources rather than using them again is also economically unsustainable. We would welcome your views on the use of waste disposal in England, and in particular on:

- How best to further reduce the amount of waste going to landfill?

Retain a Landfill Tax escalator of some sort. It may be necessary for the rate of growth to be considered but, as a mechanism, it has worked.

There are moves afoot at a European level which are likely to set a ban on the landfilling of certain waste types. That level of prescription can only work where there are alternatives to landfilling. Landfill Tax does go some way to providing an economic environment in which alternatives can become viable.

- What are the types of waste where a continuation of landfill might be acceptable?

Waste for which there is no reuse or recycling potential.

- When should we aim to be as close to zero waste to landfill as possible?

A balance between realism and aspiration might suggest sometime in the decade between 2020 and 2030. There certainly should be a push for activity and improvement now and perhaps, similar to LATS, there could be some interim levels of achievement along the way.